

to this group. Whereas puma naturally is "puma" (I leave it to others to decide whether this beast ever jumped the Pacific Ocean), the Quechua word for "gold" is however, sorry, *kuri*, *quri*, or *xuri* (depending on the dialect, reflecting Proto-Quechua \**quri*; cf. also Aymara *quri*). In addition, as the Quechua word order is rectum-regens, the compound would give no sense—its meaning being, if one follows Rjabchikov's set-up, "puma gold."

Therefore, as we now can be sure that *pumakari* is not a Quechua word, we might look for a Polynesian etymology: The word could be split up into *pu* "aperture, opening" and *makari*, the latter being analyzed into *ma* "with" and *kari* "concavity"—thus "a concave aperture"—quite a natural descriptive name for the place.

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#### NON-POLYNESIAN RAPANUI *ngo'e*—'MILKY WAY'

Having Thor Heyerdahl's assumption of early sea routes from (South) America to Polynesia in mind, from a linguistic point of view some substratum influence of the language(s) of these Amerindians on the language of the later-arriving (Austronesian) Polynesians could be expected. As for Easter Island, representing a test case in this respect, the occurrence of the "words peculiar to Rapanui" (Langdon and Tryon) might be so explained. One of the "non-Polynesian" natural history terms is *ngo'e* "Milky Way" (cf. Proto-Polynesian \**kaniva* "Milky Way").

Milky Way—consisting of numerous stars which our eye perceives as a silver ribbon—has, for many ancient people, been the path upon which the dead wandered into the beyond, or the deity who protected men when it was dark. Even "Milky Way" has its origin in Greek mythology when Hera pulled away little Heracles from her breast, squirting her milk up into the sky. So it seems only natural that the Way in most languages is expressed by a compound as, for example (in translation), "celestial river" in Aymara and Japanese.

However, before using such a "hard" word as "non-Polynesian," one should always try to find an intra-Polynesian solution. Thus, looking for a Polynesian cognate of Rapanui *ngo'e*, it does not seem to be too far fetched to think of Hawaiian *noe* "mist, fog" as a way to define Milky Way: "(star) mist" seems to be quite natural. Therefore, one could set up a Proto-East-Polynesian form \**ngo'e* (where \**ng* > *n* and \* > 0 as regular Hawaiian correspondences). From a semantic point of view, even Tuamotuan *noe* "dawn, dawn light" would belong here, but \**ngo'e* would be reflected in Tuamotuan as *ngoe*.

Anyway, it seems apparent now that Rapanui *ngo'e* has to be deleted from the list of "non-Polynesian" words. Other words on the list may have the same destiny.

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## REVIEWS



TWO NEW BOOKS ON RONGORONGO!!



### *Rongorongo: The Easter Island Script. History, Traditions, Texts*

by Steven Roger Fischer

Oxford University Press, 1997. 714 pp.

0-19-823710-3 £90 / \$115.

### *Glyphbreaker*

by Steven Roger Fischer

Copernicus, New York, 1997. 234 pp.

0-387-98241-8 £15.50 / \$ 25.

#### Reviews by Paul G. Bahn

At first glance, a dense volume devoted to the esoteric world of Easter Island's enigmatic script is an unlikely candidate for a good read. But in "*Rongorongo*," Steven Fischer, an American-born New Zealander, has achieved a breathtaking triple tour de force. First, in tracing the development of our knowledge of this script, from its first mention by the European missionaries of the 1860s onward, his text is a feast of information. Indeed it is the most erudite piece of research on Easter Island's history and culture that I have read since the monographs of the Norwegian Expedition of the 1950s, and those were multi-authored works. Fischer appears to have seen and read every available document, consulted every source, and even the most advanced specialists in Easter Island studies will learn a great deal from his rich but succinct chapters and their copious scholarly footnotes.

Second, he presents the fullest and most accurate data compiled so far on the script itself, which currently survives as rows of incised motifs on only 25 assorted pieces of wood, scattered through the world's museums. Fischer has actually handled and examined almost all of these objects himself, prevented only from seeing the specimen in Tahiti by the cost of travel, and the two specimens in Washington's Smithsonian Institution by that museum's denying him access, for which bizarre conduct it should hang its head in shame.

Third, and perhaps most important, it was in the course of his documentation of the *rongorongo* script that Fischer, an eminent epigrapher with a knowledge of numerous different languages, achieved a decipherment (see *New Scientist* 15 June 1996). This does not mean that he can read the script yet—far from it—but he now understands the key to its structure, which constitutes a decipherment (Champollion first unlocked the structure of Egyptian hieroglyphics and was hailed as their decipherer, long before they were all read).

This is not to say that Fischer's decipherment has been greeted with universal praise. Since his claim was first published and publicized, others who had devoted many years to the same challenge have issued various objections and denials, some with scholarly politeness, others with a certain malevolence. To his great credit, Fischer discusses what he considers to be the shortcomings of his colleagues' approaches in a very detached fashion, displaying great generosity even to his most vitriolic

critics. He does, however, give short shrift to the lunatic fringe who have always found the script a fertile playground for their imaginations, seeing links between Easter Island and the Indus Valley script (of 4000 years earlier, and at the other side of the globe!), as well as even more tenuous ties to Egypt, Cornwall, Dalmatia or Zimbabwe. Most "decipherments" of *rongorongo* proposed in the past were no more than simple guesswork, as his account makes devastatingly clear.

Where Fischer's own work is concerned, he feels confident that most of the surviving examples of the script are cosmogonies (i.e. chants explaining the wide variety of fanciful copulations that led to the creation of everything in the natural world). It is certainly noteworthy that, in 1994, the first presentation of his claim, at an international conference on Austronesian linguistics in Holland, received overwhelming backing from his peers, and that Thomas Barthel, the universally respected doyen of *rongorongo* studies, who died last year, sent him a letter declaring "unlimited endorsement."

Fischer's "*Glyphbreaker*" is a far shorter and more readable account of his own life and career; the *rongorongo* story constitutes the final section, but the bulk of the book covers his earlier decipherment of Europe's oldest known script, the enigmatic markings on Crete's Phaistos Disc of 1600 BC. When my essay on Fischer and *rongorongo* appeared in *New Scientist*, the section devoted to the Phaistos Disc was edited out for lack of space, with only a brief mention remaining. Ironically, almost all of the letters which arrived in response were inquiries about this earlier work on the Disc, which has posed a tantalizing challenge to many minds for decades. So, for all those who have been unable to obtain a copy of Fischer's small 1988 book on the decipherment, *Glyphbreaker* provides a step-by-step account of how he cracked this code, proceeding with the utmost care and objectivity, constantly modifying and improving his method, and gradually filling in the blanks. He eventually arrived at the unsuspected conclusion that the Disc was inscribed with an ancient Minoan language that was closely related to Mycenaean Greek. It constituted a call to arms, to repel the Carians, piratical invaders from Anatolia. Fischer achieved a thoroughly believable translation which was rewarded with a congratulatory reception from the National Geographic Society in Washington—but once again, his claim met with a very mixed response from fellow epigraphers. Indeed he describes the reaction by some as "a rude slap in the face." Yet his decipherment later found telling support in the discovery that Thucydides, the 5th century BC Greek historian, claimed that Minos of Crete had driven the Carians out of the Cyclades, an event that was of such importance in Helladic history that it was obviously passed down for a thousand years or more.

The most impressive aspect of *Glyphbreaker* is not so much that this remarkable man has been able to crack two entirely different scripts, a feat unique in the history of epigraphy, but rather that he has done so despite tremendous privations in his life. With the good fortune to have a supportive and devoted wife, Fischer has endured years of financial difficulty, of times when a telephone was not affordable and even stamps for letters to colleagues had to be carefully rationed. His efforts and dogged persistence have paid off, twice, if not in financial terms then certainly in the satisfaction of achieving a solution to two tremendous puzzles which had defeated many great minds.

Regardless of the eventual validity of Fischer's solutions—and certainly to a layman such as myself who does not know a grapheme from a glyph, his method, as painstakingly explained here, appears logical, objective and impeccable—one cannot but admire the selfless and single-minded dedication with which he has pursued his goal.

[An edited version of this review appeared in *New Scientist* for 14 February 1998]

## *Bali Handbook, Second Edition (1997)*


by Bill Dalton

Black/white photos and line drawings,  
750 pages, 135 maps; \$19.95  
Moon Travel Handbooks, Chico, CA  
email: sbooth@moon.com

*Review by Georgia Lee*

The author of this travel book, Bill Dalton, is the founder of Moon Publications and the author of Moon's earlier *Indonesia Handbook* and the First Edition of the *Bali Handbook*. Thirty years of Indonesian experience is behind the book and its depth of coverage is stunning. Dalton's observations and writings have an anthropological emphasis and the details in the book obviously come from a long familiarity with the subject. The first half of the book describes the land, flora and fauna, the convoluted history, tourism, language, religion, music and the arts. A section is devoted to festivals and events, which seem to consume a great deal of time and energy in Bali. Dalton covers the usual "getting around" information and includes how to deal with officials, what to take, and how to stay healthy. One section discusses the ecological problems plaguing this island—from an surreal population of scabrous dogs to erosion from forest removal.

The second part of the book is divided up by regencies. Each descriptive section includes sights, accommodations, food, shopping, sports, trekking, golfing, mountain climbing, snorkeling, etc., for all of the nine divisions. There is a comprehensive glossary of Balinese terms and 21 pages of Bahasa Indonesia—phrases. The reading list is extensive and annotated. Whether or not one is planning a trip to the magical island of Bali, *Bali Handbook* can be read for pleasure and information. It is indispensable for the traveler.

That Bali is such a bargain at this time is reflected in the March 30<sup>th</sup> issue of *Business Week* which describes some of the current prices. The rupiah has been devaluated by 80% as a result of the Asian financial crisis, thus providing great discounts—not only in hotels and food, but also in Balinese art, ranging from batik baby clothes to stone statues, to gold and silver jewelry. 



*From rei-miro to Makemake, from tahonga to birdman.  
All Rapanui motifs from island petroglyphs and artifacts.  
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